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ABSTRACT

The tradition of reading aloud to children has great intrinsic value and should be continued as part of the language arts program. Five major reasons for reading aloud to children can be gleaned from recent linguistic and psychological research and from folklore and intuition: (1) It allows the modeling of syntactic and phonemic language patterns, which is particularly helpful in working with children who speak nonstandard dialects. While speech is an important model in the imitation of syntax, written language is a "purer" form and thus more valuable for modeling. Hearing words in context increases listeners' receptive vocabularies and introduces them to alternative ways of expressing themselves. (2) It allows an identification with models, exposing children to literary characters with whom they can identify, as well as to worlds of experience. (3) It provides a commonality of experience to listeners from diverse backgrounds. (4) It develops listening skills and increases the listening attention span. (5) It motivates listeners to want to read, frequently stimulating them to seek out books that have been read to them. Other reasons for reading aloud to children include its contributions to parent/child sharing and to children who cannot or will not read on their own. (GT)

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READING ALOUD TO CHILDREN: A RATIONALE

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Telling teachers and parents to read aloud to children seems to be spotlighting the obvious, since no one disputes the value of reading an enjoyable book to an enraptured audience. However, there are significant reasons to read aloud from a psycholinguistic point-of-view; and, with a finite number of minutes in the instructional block, teachers are increasingly being asked to justify their activities bearing on the acquisition of reading, i.e. language, skills. Reading aloud to children then begins to be a luxury for which there is sparse time. This report seeks to justify the expenditure of time and indeed, plead for continued adherence to this tradition.

Five major reasons for reading aloud to children can be gleaned from recent linguistic and psychological research, folklore, and intuition: 1) It allows the modeling of language patterns (syntactic and phonemic), 2) It allows an identification with models, 3) It provides a commonality of experience to listeners from diverse backgrounds, 4) It promotes listening/reading comprehension skills, and 5) It motivates children to <u>want</u> to read.

We are more aware than ever before in public education that children very often come to school with radically different languages from the "standard"English that pervades

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the texts and literature they encounter. However, developing a facility with the school language has to be a goal of the language arts program. Since most often the teacher's speech is a model for the children, coupled with the books used -- literature, poetry, texts -- oral reading by the teacher can allow the modeling of speech patterns on the syntactic level and the phonemic level. That is, children can imitate the structure and the sounds they hear. Because many children hear a different dialect in school as compared to the one at home, and the language in books is a closer approximation to the one used in school, then the listening to and imitation of the language in children's books should transfer more easily to a facility with the school language. The role of imitation has frequently been cited by linguists to be of importance in the development of language. (Cazden, 1972). It has been demonstrated in a number of studies that syntactical control increases through the elementary school years. For example, children gain use of the passive construction (Chomsky, C., 1969) and they learn to expand and elaborate sentences; that is, to produce longer, more complex units of language as they grow older (Hunt, 1969, and DeStefano and Fox, 1974). While speech is an important model in the imitation of syntax, speech is often conversationally fragmented and dependent on non-verbal cues for meaning. The written language, on the other hand, is a "purer" form in that the syntax flows logically, it is independent of non-verbal cues, and the words can be turned to again and again. While reading to children, a teacher can combine the best of

both worlds because (s)he can infuse the syntactic order of the written language with pitch, juncture, stress, and other paralinguistic cues that contribute to the interpretation of a passage.

In the same manner, the imitation of sounds (and consequently, words) has a direct hearing on the increased vocabulary that is a result of hearing stories and poems. Hearing the words in context not only adds to the number of meanings in a listener's receptive vocabulary, but it also gives the listener alternative ways to express himself or herself. For example, another way to say "I ain't got none" is " I don't have any,"and regardless of which is representative of the child's internalized grammar and which may be found in a book, the important realization is that there can be two ways (at least) to express that thought and it is advantageous to know both.

The second reason for reading aloud, the identification with models, encompasses many things. There are characters in literature who encounter and solve problems, who relate to each other in positive (and negative) ways, who represent different life styles and occupational roles; in short, people who can teach through vicarious example. This is the power of literature: to instruct, to inculcate values and attitudes, and finally to initiate children and indeed everyone into the mythos of humankind. Listening to literature exposes children to worlds of experience, a veritable marketplace of ideas. The identification process is a base for the most personal metaphor, you can become that character.

Literature, then is the vehicle through which human relations are learned and concepts are grasped in the most dramatic circumstances.

In addition to linguistic styles, we are also more aware of the diverse cultural backgrounds represented in the present public school student body. One has only to look in rural as well as urban classrooms to realize that the children and youth are unique individuals who share only a few common denominators in attitudes, beliefs, likes, dislikes, and familiar experiences. Therefore teachers must provide a reference point, the association from which conceptual thinking will come, the concrete example from which abstractions are derived. Children's literature can provide a common experience. Hearing a story about the land of Prydain (Alexander, 1964) can lead to a map-making exercise; listening to The Search For Delicious (Babbitt, 1969) can initiate personal searches for deliciousness, whether delicious is defined in terms of food, power, or self-identity. The possibilities are endless, as many ideas as there are stories.

The fourth reason for reading aloud is concerned with the fine art of listening, one of the neglected areas of language arts, well behind reading, writing, and speaking in time spent teaching. But surely this is a skill that is most important in communication -- a skill that makes us receptive to others. Being read to helps us practice this skill, just as SSR allows the practice of silent reading skills without the pressure of being tested somehow over the material being read. The reading-aloud time can be a painless, pressureless

way to develop listening skills and to increase the listening attention span. Because reading and listening are both receptive communication processes, they share a common list of comprehension skills. Listening, like reading, should be an intellectually active exercise in shich the listener is questioning, hypothisizing, organizing, remembering, and judging the information (s)he is receiving. Because children are avid consumers of information via books, television, films, and other media, the listening/reading comprehension skills are even more important because they foster critical thinking in this electronic age when mass media can influence unwary minds.

A fifth major reason to read aloud, that of motivating listeners to become avid readers, rests on the implication that one of the main goals of education is to teach children to read. It is axiomatic that an educated person is a literate person. This is hardly the place to stress the importance of reading -- suffice it to say that many children do not come to school valuing the written language, and because the demands of a technological society are such that an illiterate person can hardly survive, motivation of this type seems to be justified. After hearing a story, children will often seek out the book. This phenomenon carries over to other media, as "The Little House on the Prairie," a television show spawned from books, prompted increased sales in the Laura Ingalls Wilder Little House books; and the movies "Pippi Longstocking" and Charlotte's Web" each renewed interest in the books by Astrid Lindgren and E. B. White, res-

pectively.

Finally, there are many more reasons why a teacher or parent could profitably spend time reading aloud to children. At home, before bedtime, it calms the frenetic pace of daily living and encourages a special sharing among all members of the family (Chan, 1974). Introducing children to literature is a worthwhile endeavor, as literature can offer a wider range of human experience than anyone can experience directly (Chambers, 1975). Also, reading aloud provides a literary experience to children who cannot or will not read.

The five major reasons selected, namely the modeling of language patterns and sounds, identification, commonality of experience, listening/reading comprehension skills, and motivation, seemed to be the most significant, speaking to the issues in public education and confirmed by linguistic research of our present decade. This very important, personal, pleasurable period of the school day, one that heightens the imaginative powers like no other (with the possible exception of reading) should be recognized for the intrinsic value that it has; it cannot be duplicated by other activities. Let's keep reading stories, poems, books and plays to listeners who can gain so much from it.

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